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ABSTRACT

A cooperative paraprofessional experience program between the Elementary Education Department at Montana State University and the nearby public school system is described. Junior-level students enrolled for two quarters of paraprofessional training taken concurrently with two blocks of professional coursework. The benefits of the program were fourfold: (1) elementary school students, many with special needs, received extended instruction; (2) university students were able to observe and institute educational practices presented in coursework while assessing their own aptitude for teaching; (3) elementary school teachers received much needed help and assistance in instructional and teaching-related tasks; and (4) university instruction was much improved through opportunities provided for students to really appply skills. (DS)

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1979 Distinguished Achievement Award Application

NAME OF PROGRAM: Elementary Education Paraprofessional Programs

INSTITUTION: Montana State University

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Part I - Summary

The increasing demand for a better prepared elementary school teacher has necessitated a re-evaluation of teacher training programs throughout the United States. Additionally, teacher training institutions have both sought and been requested to provide services to elementary school students with special needs.

The institution of competency-based and field-tested paraprofessional experiences, taken concurrently with university methods courses, was seen by our department as a criterial element in an effective teacher training program. As an alternative track, it was hoped that those paraprofessionals not assigned to elementary school classrooms could serve as tutors to "home-bound" boys and girls, children whose primary language was not English and students who needed special instruction to overcome learning difficulties.

Through a cooperative program between the Elementary Education Department at Montana State University and nearby public school systems, the junior level student enrolls for two quarters of paraprofessional training taken concurrently with two blocks of professional coursework.

The benefits of this cooperative program seem to be four-fold in that (1) elementary school students, many with special needs, are receiving extended instruction, (2) university students are able to observe and institute educational practices presented in coursework, while assessing their own aptitude for teaching, (3) elementary school teachers receive much needed help and assistance in instructional and teaching related tasks and (4) university instruction is much improved by having opportunities for the students to reaily apply skills presented in class and evaluation of teaching competencies may be conducted in a more meaningful manner than merely judging indices to teaching effectiveness in the normal university classroom.

Staff, students, school officials and parents have commented on the effectiveness of the program as well as the public service aspects of helping children with special needs.

Part II - Comprehensive Explanation

Description and Development of the Program

No improvement in teacher education has come about without extensive planning, involvement and cooperation of all necessary agencies, a logical developmental progression toward the goal and, yes, a certain amount of trial and error. The development and institution of the elementary education paraprofessional offerings at Montana State University involved each of the above-noted elements.

During the 1969-70 school year, classroom teachers in the Bozeman Montana Public Schools were surveyed as to their desire to have paraprofessional aids in their classrooms while the university students completed some courses on campus. There were mixed reactions. Some were enthusiastic about the ideas, others were apprehensive - feeling that the university student would be more of a burden than a help!

Ten students were enrolled in an individual problems course to serve as participants in a pilot offering during spring quarter, 1970. A committee of university staff, school teachers, administrators, and students was formed to develop a policy handbook for the operation of a paraprofessional quarter and a list of competencies to be met. University organizational matters were adjusted and approval from various governance agencies was gained. The initial paraprofessional offering was implemented during the 1971-72 school year and provided for the student to spend four mornings a week in a teacher's classroom while taking four methods courses during the afternoons. The program required both a cooperating classroom teacher and a university supervisor.

Time spent in traditional university classes was reduced to allow for the field experience. During the first year of operation the program was evaluated and seemed to be working quite well.

Instructors, as well as students, in those courses not associated with the paraprofessional offering complained that their courses could be improved by a field-based experience. The planning committee was reinstituted and a second quarter of afternoon paraprofessional experience was added, beginning autumn quarter of 1974.

For a number of reasons, certain students' schedules did not allow for complete morning or afternoon paraprofessional assignments. At the same time, the Elementary Education Department was receiving a growing number of requests for tutoring and assisting "homebound" children, children whose primary language is not English (for example, Vietnamese, Ethopian, Israeli), and children with special learning needs. During the 1974-75 academic year an alternative tutoring track to paraprofessional experiences was added to meet these requests for service as well as to provide for university students unable to free morning or afternoon blocks for normal assignments. (See attached Diagram A)

Eighty-seven paraprofessionals enrolled in Group A and ninty-one paraprofessionals completed Group B during the 1974-75 academic year. The 1975-76 academic year saw 180 paraprofessionals, 1976-77 academic year saw 185 paraprofessionals while the 1977-78 academic year contained 190 paraprofessionals.

An American Indian Option in Elementary Education was instituted during the 1976-77 academic year. Paraprofessional assignments in a reservation school were seen as an important element of the program and began as the first students from this option attained the junior level.

Objectives of the Para Program

1. To provide opportunities for elementary teacher candidates to work

with children and thus relate learnings from the methods courses to children and teaching.

2. To provide the classroom teacher with valuable and needed assistance as a teacher aid.
3. To allow prospective teacher candidates an opportunity to assess their own attitudes and competencies for effectively working with children.
4. To provide a field setting to evaluate competencies of prospective teachers.
5. To assist in improving the teaching skills of elementary education students through constructive supervising suggestions.
6. To provide special instruction for "homebound" children.
7. To provide special instruction for children whose native language is not English.
8. To provide individual instruction for children with special needs.
9. To provide on-site experiences for those students in the American Indian Education Option.

Personnel Involved

All staff members and graduate teaching assistants (8 staff, 7 GTA's) in the Elementary Education Department accept paraprofessional supervision as in integral part of their university responsibility. All junior level undergraduate students are assigned to paraprofessional or tutoring duties in conjunction with their methods classes.

Budget

The Paraprofessional Program exists without additional funding to the normal budget. When the program was instituted, the class time for methods courses was reduced and field assignment substituted for the reduced class

time. Staff members willingly accept the additional supervisory duties to improve the teacher training program in their subject areas.

Contribution To The Improvement of Teacher Education

Improvement in the education of teacher candidates has resulted in a much more experienced and competent graduate. Upon graduation, the candidate has served in five different classrooms, usually with five different teachers at five different levels during the paraprofessional and student teaching quarters. The students have had the opportunity to assess their teaching aptitude as well as to be evaluated on their teaching competencies in a more realistic setting. University instruction has become much more pragmatic and related to the actuality of elementary school teaching. Teacher candidates have shown improved readiness, both for student teaching during their senior year and teaching assignment upon graduation. Lastly, the department makes a contribution to the needs of teachers for additional assistance in helping children with special needs.

Evaluation: Methods and Results

Quarterly evaluation is conducted in the assessment of the program by university students and cooperating elementary school teachers. Prior to the institution of paraprofessional offerings, graduates ranked student teaching as the most valuable component in the teacher education program. Now the paraprofessional quarters rank with student teaching as being most valuable. Two masters degree professional projects have been conducted on the evaluation of the paraprofessional offerings, both showing positive conclusions as to the effectiveness of the program. These studies, as well as letters from appreciative parents and children, can be made available for review by your committee.

Paraprofessional Experience
Elementary Education Department
Montana State University
Bozeman, Montana

BLOCK A:

EDEL 300	Paraprofessional Exp.	3 crs.
EDEL 305	Teaching Reading	4 crs.
EDEL 312	Teaching Lang. Arts	3 crs.
EDEL 333	Teaching Mathematics	4 crs.
EDEL 400	Paraprof. Seminar	2 crs.
		16 crs.

A.M. paraprofessional assignment in two elementary school classrooms in the Public Schools

OR

Paraprofessional assignment in two elementary school classrooms in an American Indian Reservation School

BLOCK B:

EDEL 300	Paraprofessional Exp.	3 crs.
EDEL 313	Teaching Social Stds.	3 crs.
EDEL 325	Teaching Science	4 crs.
EDEL 335	Teaching P.E.	4 crs.
EDFD 323	Teaching With Media	2 crs.
		16 crs.

P.M. paraprofessional assignment in two elementary school classrooms in the Public Schools

OR

Paraprofessional assignment in two elementary school classrooms in an American Indian Reservation School